

# Jaina Studies



NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTRE OF JAINA STUDIES



March 2011  
Issue 6

## New Discoveries from Old Finds: A Jain Sculpture in the British Museum

Michael Willis

One of the most notable Jain sculptures in the British Museum, held in the collections for over a century, is a standing figure of the goddess Ambikā (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Elegantly carved in white marble, it carries an inscription of King Bhoja on the base with a date corresponding to 1034-35. The inscription has presented difficulties due to the formulaic character of the writing and the abraded surface of the stone. A number of attempts have been made to decipher it, but a fresh examination over the last year has led to a better reading and to new insights into the significance of the image and the history of some of the leading personalities in Bhoja's kingdom. Bhoja (r. circa 1000 to 1055 CE) is the most famous of the Paramāra rulers of central India, renowned for having been an exceptional king and polymath. Scholars flocked to his court and their work, erroneously ascribed to him by later tradition, included a large number of texts on philosophy, astronomy, medicine, yoga, architecture and other subjects. Amongst these, the most noted in the field of grammar was the *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa* or *Necklace of Sarasvatī*.

The *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa* is of special interest here because the title not only highlights the importance of Sarasvatī in the courts of medieval India, but also indicates King Bhoja's special dedication to that deity. Merutuṅga's *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, completed in the early years of the fourteenth century, recounts that Bhoja frequented the temple of Sarasvatī at his capital in Dhār and that this temple, like Bhoja's grammar, was called the 'Necklace of Sarasvatī'.<sup>2</sup> The link between Sarasvatī and the Paramāra kings is confirmed by an inscription of Arjunavarman, a later Paramāra king who ruled circa 1210 to 1215.<sup>3</sup> This records that Arjunavarman regarded himself as an incarnation of King Bhoja and that he watched a play in the temple of Sarasvatī composed by his court poet Madana. These connections aid our understanding of the reading proposed for the inscription on the pedestal of the British Museum's sculpture given here.

This text presents a number of problems, not all of which can be addressed in the space of this article. Some key points, however, can be explained and are of special interest for the history of medieval Jainism. At the outset we can summarily dismiss the attempts, based on a partial reading of the inscription, which included only the date and the words *Vāgdevī*, *āpsaraḥ* and *Bhoja*, to claim this sculpture as Bhoja's image of Sarasvatī. There is no reason to chart the history of these misconceptions, based as they are on an ignorance of Sanskrit, epigraphy and the basics of Indian iconography.

The first half of the inscription is slightly damaged but

is nonetheless clear in stating that an individual named Vararuci was the *dharmadhī*, or religious superintendent, of King Bhoja and that he was responsible for overseeing the Candranagarī and Vidyādhārī schools. These were branches, or *śākhās*, within the Śvetāmbara tradition of Jainism.<sup>4</sup> More important, and clearer, is the second half of the record. This tells us that Vararuci made the sculpture of Ambikā on which this inscription is carved. The inscription is thus of a standard type, its aim being to give an account of the donor who was responsible for the image. In this sense, it is entirely typical and unexceptional. What draws our attention is the additional statement that before Vararuci had the Ambikā made, he commissioned three Jinas and an image of Vāgdevī, the 'goddess of speech'. As is well known, Vāgdevī is another name for Sarasvatī, a divinity who enjoyed a number of synonymous appellations such as Bhārati and Śārada.

Recent research has shown that the Ambikā sculpture was found in 1875 on the site of the old city palace in Dhār.<sup>5</sup> Given this findspot, in the centre of the old Paramāra capital, it seems likely that the Vāgdevī mentioned in the image inscription was the celebrated Sarasvatī at Dhār, that is to say, the Sarasvatī mentioned by Merutuṅga. The historical importance of this Sarasvatī in the life of the Paramāras has already been noted. In his *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, Merutuṅga mentions the temple several times, in one instance telling us that Bhoja visited the Sarasvatī temple in the company of Dhanapāla, the famous Jain savant. On the occasion of this visit, Dhanapāla drew the king's attention to a tablet engraved with the *Ṛṣabhapañcāsikā*.<sup>6</sup> This is a set of verses in praise of the first Tīrthaṅkara that Dhanapāla himself had composed.<sup>7</sup> As a Jain inscription would only appear in a Jain temple, this episode shows the Sarasvatī temple at Dhār was dedicated to the Jain form of the goddess. Merutuṅga was, of course, writing some two hundred and fifty years after Bhoja and was an advocate of the Jain cause, so his account could be dismissed as a distortion of the facts. The British Museum inscription, however, belongs to Bhoja's time and shows that the Sarasvatī was indeed a Jain divinity.

That the Sarasvatī mentioned in the British Museum inscription was the main Sarasvatī in Dhār is confirmed by the likely identity of Vararuci. There are a number of Vararucis in the history of Indian literature, the most famous being the author of the first grammar of the Prakrit language, the *Prākṛtaprakāśa*. This Vararuci lived long before the Paramāra period. In medieval times, Vararuci reappears as a minor character in a number of narratives, most notably Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, a work

1 British Museum Asia 1909.1224.1 from the estate of William Kincaid.

2 C. H. Tawney, *The Prabandhacintāmaṇi or Wishing-stone of Narratives* (Calcutta, 1901): 56-7.

3 The discovery of the inscription is recorded in a paper written in 1903 by K. K. Lele and published in S. K. Dikshit, ed., *Pārijātamañjari alias Vijayaśrī by Rāja-Guru Madana alias Bāla-Sarasvatī* (Bhopal, 1968): xviii-xxiv.

4 S. B. Deo, *History of Jaina Monachism from Inscriptions and Literature* (Poona, 1956): 361-64. M.U.K. Jain, *Jaina Sects and Schools*, (Delhi, 1975), p. 51. I am grateful to Paul Dundas for suggesting that the inscription appears to refer to branches of the Jaina faith, personal communication, April, 2009.

5 This recorded in [C. B. Lele], *Parma Inscriptions in Dhar State, 875-1310 AD* (Dhar, [1944]): iii. The discovery took place in 1875 when the present palace was being remade.

6 Tawney, *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, p. 57.

7 Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, 5: §4210.



## TEXT

- (1) aum | sṛmadbhojanareṃdracāṃdranagarīvid-  
yādhārī[dha\*<sup>1</sup>]rmmadhīḥ yo - - U U - U - khalu  
sukhaprasthāpanā-  
(2) yāpsarāḥ [l\*<sup>2</sup>] vāgdevī(ṃ\*) prathama(ṃ\*) vidhāya  
jananī(ṃ\*) pas[c\*]āj jinānā(ṃ\*) trayīm ambā(ṃ\*)  
nityaphalādhikāṃ vararuciḥ<sup>3</sup> mūrttim [śu\*]bhā(ṃ\*) ni-  
(3) rmmame [l\*] iti subhaṃ | sutradhārasahirasutamāṇat  
haleṇa<sup>4</sup> ghaṭitaṃ || vi(jñā)nikasivadevena likhitam iti ||  
(4) saṃvat 100 91 [l\*]

## TRANSLATION

Aum. Vararuci, who is *sṛmad* King Bhoja's *dharma*-superintendent of the Candranagarī and Vidyādhārī [branches of Jainism], a nymph [as it were] for the easy removal [of ignorance?...], that Vararuci, having first fashioned Vāgdevī the mother [and] afterwards a triad of Jinās, made this beautiful image of Ambā, ever abundant in fruit. Blessings! It was executed by Maṇathala, son of the *sūtradhāra* Sahira. It was written by Śivadeva the proficient. Year 1091.

1 The *akṣara* is absent but is needed to fill the metre and render sense.

2 Understand as *sukhaprasthāpanāy=āpsarāḥ*. The syllables immediately before are damaged and not legible but their number and length are indicated by the metre.

3 The *visarga* is clearly visible, excusable at the *yati*, but anyway read: *vararuciḥ*.

4 Read: *sūtradhara-*

of the eleventh century and composed in Kashmir, and Kṣemendra's *Brhatkathāmañjarī*, also of the eleventh century and from Kashmir.<sup>8</sup> In both these works, Vararuci is described as a learned *brāhmaṇa* and a keen devotee of Sarasvatī. Vararuci also appears in Jain medieval narratives in the same role, although some details of his career are changed. Among these narratives, the most curious is Hemacandra's *Parīśiṣṭaparvan*.<sup>9</sup> Although Hemacandra admits that Vararuci was 'the crest-jewel of poets, philosophers and grammarians', he attacks Vararuci in a satirical fashion, singling him out for special criticism as a charlatan and political rogue. Why this should be so can be explained by the suggestion that the Vararuci which Hemacandra had in mind was the Vararuci in the British Museum inscription. In other words, there was an eminent Jain living in Mālvā in the eleventh century named Vararuci that Hemacandra felt inspired to criticise. This Vararuci seems to have been none other than Jain sage

8 N. M. Penzer, ed., *The Ocean of Story*, being C. H. Tawney's *Translation of Somadeva's Kathā Sārīt Sāgara* (or Ocean of Streams of Story), 10 vols. (London, 1924-[1928]). *The Brhatkathāmañjarī of Kshemendra*, ed. Śivadatta and Kāśīnātha Pāṇḍurang Parab (Bombay, 1901); M. B. Emeneau, 'Kṣemendra as kavi,' *JAOS* 53 (1933): 124-43; Emeneau warns the *editio princeps* is very faulty.

9 Translated in Richard Fynes, *The Lives of the Jain Elders* (Oxford, 1998). The story of Vararuci appears in canto 8 from which the present account draws.



Fig 1 Standing figure of the goddess Ambikā, from Dhār, Madhya Pradesh. Dated by inscription 1034-35. British Museum Asia 1909,1224.1. Image © British Museum

Dhanapāla. There are a number of inter-dependent and inter-locking reasons to support this suggestion. For the sake of clarity, and to summarise, these are best presented in point form:

- Dhanapāla's family hailed from Madhyadeśa and, according the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, Dhanapāla was immensely learned in all branches of orthodox knowledge.<sup>10</sup> This helps account for the descriptions of Vararuci that are given in the works of Somadeva, Kṣemendra and Hemacandra. As just noted, Hemacandra was inimical towards Vararuci but admits he was very learned. An important advisor to the Paramāra kings, Dhanapāla was necessarily seen as antithetical to Cālukya interests, the Paramāras and Cālukyas being bitter political rivals. Because Hemacandra was supported by the Cālukyas, and held a parallel post in Gujarat as a royal advisor, he would have cultivated a special dislike and distrust for Dhanapāla.
- That the political tussle between the Paramāra and Cālukya courts extended to intellectual and literary matters is shown by the fact that Hemacandra felt obliged to write a new grammar to supercede and

10 Tawney, *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, pp. 52-4.

displace the *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa*.<sup>11</sup> Although this is ascribed to Bhoja by tradition, it is more likely the work of Dhanapāla given the latter's other grammatical work (on which see the next point).

- Vararuci was a name connected with Prakrit grammar and lexicography at several points in the history of Indian literature. This was well known to the Indian tradition of scholarship and prompted the reactivation of the name on a number of occasions. Dhanapāla composed the Prakrit lexicon *Pāyīlacchīnāmamālā* in the closing verses of which he states that the work was completed in VS 1029 (CE 972-73), the year that Mānyakheṭa was sacked by the 'lord of Mālava', i.e. Harṣa Śiyaka.<sup>12</sup> A key feature of Dhanapāla's lexicon is its close link to Vararuci's *Prakṛtaprakāśa*, the two works together being essential tools for proper metrical composition in Mahārāṣṭrī Prakrit.
- Once settled in the Paramāra capital, Dhanapāla is said in the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* to have become the leading *paṇḍit* in the kingdom. He opposed Jainism at first but was eventually won over by his brother Śobhana.<sup>13</sup> The latter wrote the *Caturviṃśatikāstuti* in praise of the twenty-four Jinas and Dhanapāla composed a commentary on that text. As noted above, Dhanapāla also authored the *Rṣabhapañcāśikā*, a hymn to the first Jina Rṣabhanātha.<sup>14</sup> These developments explain why the Vararuci in the British Museum inscription was a follower Jainism.
- Dhanapāla composed his novel *Tilakamañjarī* after his conversion. In the prologue to that work, Dhanapāla reports that he was given the title 'Sarasvatī' by Vākpati Muñja.<sup>15</sup> This shows that Dhanapāla, like the Vararuci in the British Museum inscription and the epic-verse narratives, was a devotee of the goddess Sarasvatī.

11 *Prabhāvākarita*, ed. Jina Vijaya Muni (Ahmedabad, 1940): 185 (22: vv. 87-88).

12 Georg Bühler, 'Pāyīlacchīhī Nāmamālā', in *Beiträge zur Kunde der Indogermanischen Sprachen*, vol. 4, edited by Adalbert Bezzenberger (Göttingen, 1878) The more recent edition, which is used here, by B. J. Dośī, *Pāyīlacchīnāmamālā* (Prākṛta-Lakṣmīnāmamālā) (Bombay, 1960): v. 276: *vikkamakālassa gae auṇattisuttare sahasaṇṇi / mālavanarīṇi dadhādīe tādīe mannakheḍammi*, i.e. 'When one thousand years of the Vikrama era and twenty nine besides had passed, when Mānyakheṭa had been plundered in consequence of an attack by the lord of Mālava.' Further comments on the *Pāyīlacchī* in R. Pischel, *A Comparative Grammar of the Prakrit Languages*, translated by Subhadra Jhā (Delhi, 1965): §35 and Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, 5: §4210.

13 Dhanapāla's conversion verified by contemporary textual evidence, see Bühler, 'Pāyīlacchīhī Nāmamālā', p. 74.

14 Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, 5: §4210.

15 *Tilakamañjarī* of Dhanapāla with commentaries of Śāntiācārya and Jñānakalaśa, edited by N. M. Kansara, L. D. Series, vol. 110 (Ahmedabad, 1991): 1: v. 53. As kindly pointed out to me by Paul Dundas, the Digambara scholar Nāthurāma Premī differentiated the Dhanapāla of the *Tilakamañjarī* from Dhanapāla of the *Pāyīlacchī*, see Premī, *Jain Sahitya aur Itihās* (Mumbai, 1956): 408-11. The tone of the works is no doubt different, but the historical evidence, in my view, makes an additional Dhanapāla unlikely.

These points taken together indicate that Dhanapāla lived to about eighty years of age and that he served under three Paramāra rulers: Harṣa Śiyaka (r. circa 945-73), Vākpati Muñja (r. circa 973-95) and Bhoja (r. circa 1000-55). Because Vāgdevī was naturally allied to grammar, lexicography and related sciences, Dhanapāla seems to have been given the name Vararuci as a courtly pseudonym to show he was a living and worthy representative of past notables who also bore this name.

The further implications of the British Museum inscription are many and cannot be explored here. The issues discussed nonetheless show that a co-ordination of literary and archaeological evidence does much to extend our understanding of medieval Jainism in central India.

*Michael Willis is a curator at the British Museum. He oversees the early South Asian and Himalayan collections from the late centuries BCE to circa the 14th century CE. He is the author of a number of articles and books, most recently The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual (Cambridge, 2009).*



## CALL FOR PAPERS

### 15th WORLD SANSKRIT CONFERENCE

New Delhi, 5-10 January 2012

Section 10. Jain Studies

Interested scholars are advised to follow the instructions on the WSC Homepage:

<http://www.sanskrit.nic.in/wsc15.pdf>

The Convenors:

Paul Dundas  
Peter Flügel  
Jayendra Soni  
J.B. Shah

Centre of Jaina Studies  
School of Oriental and African Studies  
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square  
London WC1 0XG

email: [jainastudies@soas.ac.uk](mailto:jainastudies@soas.ac.uk)

Centre Chair  
Dr Peter Flügel

Newsletter Editors  
Dr Peter Flügel and Janet Leigh Foster

Design  
Janet Leigh Foster

Printed by The Print Room (SOAS)

For information on the Centre please consult the Centre website:  
<http://www.soas.ac.uk/jainastudies>



SOAS • Russell Square • London WC1H 0XG •  
Email: [jainastudies@soas.ac.uk](mailto:jainastudies@soas.ac.uk)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



CENTRE OF  
JAINA STUDIES

